

Serve & Protect

by Adam Sifre

If she was still breathing, Tom promised himself he would let her live, but first things first. His shoulder ached and his right hand was throbbing. The skin was torn from two knuckles and he was pretty sure he'd broken one of them.

In the kitchen, he paused before the open freezer, listening for any sounds of life in the now quiet house. Nothing. Just the low hum of the ice box. That didn't mean anything, of course. Lori's bedroom was upstairs, and the door was closed. She might not be moving around, but that didn't mean she wasn't breathing. Not really.

Tom grabbed an ice tray from the freezer and worried out seven cubes into a small pot. He filled the pot with cold water, brought it over to the breakfast table and plunged his fist into the ice water.

"Fuck!" Even the soft bump of floating ice against his knuckles hurt. A few moments later, his hand went numb and he relished the feeling of relief. The water went from clear to tinted.

Six years. Jesus.

He'd loved her each and every one of those days; including today. He loved her now.

Sweat rolled off his nose, making tiny splashes on the ice water. His uniform was soaked through, and he could see the outline of his undershirt —

my wife beater,

- underneath the damp blue shirt. He ran his good hand through his hair. His head felt hot and wet. A moment of sheer panic set in when he realized he'd lost his hat.

It must have fallen off in ... in there. They'll find it. They'll know it was me!

Then he was laughing at the absurdity of it. The idea that his chances of "getting away with it" hinged on his hat was beyond ridiculous. His whole body shook with laughter. Ice water sloshed over the side of the pot

He didn't remember what had started it this time. It wasn't amnesia or a black out or anything like that. Tom knew that if he wanted, if he took a moment to focus, he'd remember the reason. But what did it matter really. When the heat was upon him, when his world was red, the reasons were very important. When the storms passed, however, dwelling on reasons made him feel small and insignificant.

Suddenly, everything felt heavy. He let his good hand fall like dead weight onto the table. His clothes, soaked with sweat, felt like sandbags, and it was a struggle just to remain sitting in the chair. The hand in the ice water started to throb again and Tom felt as if his fingers were locked in ice. Even his eyes felt heavy, and he closed them for a while. That helped a little.

Time passed and the house stayed quiet. Everything was heavy with July heat. Tom's throat felt raw. Had he been screaming? Maybe. Probably. Best not to pick at that particular scab right then. There was beer in the fridge. Three brown bottles of Sam Addams Pale Ale. Three bottles — what Tom liked to call “a good start.” A nice, cold bottle of beer on this stifling July day was just the ticket. But the thought of standing up and opening the refrigerator door was enough to defeat him just then. Instead he lowered his head and tipped the pot of ice water. It splashed down his throat and shirt, restoring him somewhat. There was a familiar metallic taste and it took him a second to place it.

Blood.

He felt strength begin to return. Not a lot. He could have slept for a week, he was so tired. But he could move his arms again and his eyes were open.

Still sitting in the kitchen chair, he wrestled with his belt, finally getting it free from his pants. With effort, he placed it on the table. He stared dully at it. The thick black leather, the holster, bullets, cuffs. Now that it was off, he seemed to breathe a little easier. Next came the shirt. It was wet from sweat and water, and it stuck to his chest and arms. It was another struggle a near thing. But eventually, the shirt was on the table, and Tom felt a little better.

Two for two.

Then he stood, kicked off his shoes. Really kicked them. One flew into the dining room. The other hit the kitchen window, but didn't break anything. Then the blue pants, the briefs and the wife beater.

That made him feel better. He absently scratched his balls as he stood in his kitchen — in Lori's kitchen, wondering what to do.

I should bring her some water. It's much hotter upstairs. She must be thirsty.

His eyes fell on his gun. Most of his belt was covered by the shirt he'd thrown on the table, but the holster was still visible.

"I really should check on her."

The kitchen didn't answer.

"I'll have to call an ambulance, probably. Or take her to the ER myself."

He'd never fired his gun in the line of duty. Never even taken it out of its holster. The benefit of working in a sleepy town.

"I'll just bring her some water. She'll be fine. Everything will be okay."

He ran his hand over the holster. The pistol was Glock. The department required cops to buy their own guns, and Tom had actually had to research which guns were best. He'd chosen the Glock because of its internal hammer system, making it easier to simply pull the trigger once for each shot.

Something moved upstairs and Tom became instantly alert. Had he imagined it? He stood there, naked, straining to hear. Minutes passed and he thought he'd heard it again.

"She's alive."

This time the kitchen had something to say. Tom stared at the gun in his hand.

"How did" —

A picture is worth a thousand words. A picture is worth a thousand words, Tom. A picture is worth a thousand words...

"I love her." The gun felt light in his hand. There was no weight at all to it now.

A picture

"She loves me too, you know."

is worth a thousand words.

The thought kept repeating until the words mantra became meaningless.

"No." He wouldn't do it.

He walked out of the kitchen, to the bottom of the staircase.

"I love her."

"I'll just ..."

He was halfway up the stairs. *Just what?*

"I'll just check on her. She might be thirsty."

But there was no glass of water in his hand. No ice cold bottle of pale ale. Just the weightless Glock, light as feather. His other hand covered his cock, as if he were afraid someone might see. He stood at the top of the stairs now.

"I love her! She loves me!"

Be brave. A picture is worth. Be brave.

"Yes," Tom answered himself. "I will be brave."

Then he raised the gun, pressed it under his chin and pulled the trigger.

